

For immediate release

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Eligibility Requirements for Health, Human Service Benefits Eased for Hurricane Survivors

People who have come to Montana after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina can get streamlined access to numerous benefits administered by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS).

"These people have been through so much, and our hearts go out to them," said Joan Miles, director of DPHHS. "We want to make it as easy as possible for them to get the help they need. We want them to be able to look forward to a safe and healthy future, wherever they may ultimately decide to settle."

Miles noted that many survivors of the hurricane no longer have the records or legal documents they need to prove their eligibility for various services.

"So in cooperation with the federal government, we're temporarily easing many of the eligibility and enrollment requirements they normally need to apply for benefits," she said.

Once the temporary timeframes established by individual programs end, evacuees who relocate to Montana permanently will be assisted in applying for benefits as Montana residents, she added.

The special evacuee status will apply to a full range of benefits administered by DPHHS, including Medicaid, children's health insurance, cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, food stamps, child care scholarships, and mental health services.

Evacuees who need Medicaid, TANF, or food stamps should apply at the Office of Public Assistance in the county in which they have relocated. Miles said DPHHS is already supplying these benefits to close to 100 evacuees.

Following are some of the other services that hurricane evacuees can access through the department:

- **Mental health services:** The Addictive and Mental Disorders Division of DPHHS has temporarily expanded Medicaid coverage for adult evacuees to include treatment of symptoms related to the hurricane, including mild or moderate depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Medicaid usually only covers severe disabling mental illness in adults. Evacuees who sign up for Medicaid through their local Office of Public Assistance will be able to get this benefit.

- **Immunizations for children:** All children up to 18 years old are eligible for free vaccines through the Vaccines for Children program, regardless of whether they're staying at shelters, hotels, or with family and friends, and regardless of their health insurance status.

All doctors, clinics, and health departments who provide childhood vaccinations can now immunize young evacuees for free using VFC vaccine. For more information, contact the Immunization Program of DPHHS at 406-444-5580.

- **Health insurance for children:** The Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), which provides health coverage for about 11,000 Montana children, has waived its residency requirements for hurricane evacuees. To get a CHIP application, call 1-877-543-7669, e-mail chip@mt.gov <<mailto:chip@mt.gov>>, or visit the CHIP Web site at www.chip.mt.gov <<http://www.chip.mt.gov>>. Applications are also available at local Offices of Public Assistance, community health centers, food banks, and Indian Health Service and tribal clinics.
- **Child care:** Head Start programs have been given the go-ahead to use a streamlined process to enroll children of families evacuated from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Licensed child-care homes and centers will also be able temporarily to waive the proof-of-immunization requirements for these children. The waiver expires Dec. 31.

The Early Childhood Services Bureau of DPHHS has initiated a Katrina Child Care Program for low-income families. For more information, contact the bureau toll-free at 1-866-239-0458.

- **Louisiana birth certificates.** At the request of the State of Louisiana, the DPHHS Office of Vital Records will help evacuees born in Louisiana to get free copies of their birth certificates. These may be needed to enroll children in school, get identification, and receive much-needed benefits.

Anyone needing a copy of a Louisiana birth certificate can apply at the nearest county clerk and recorder office. For more information, contact the Vital Records Office at 406-444-2685.

DPHHS reminds evacuees from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to register for disaster assistance by calling the Federal Emergency Management Agency at 1-800-621-FEMA. The phone lines are open all day, every day. Those with Internet access can register online at www.fema.gov <<http://www.fema.gov>>.

For assistance with temporary housing, health care, food, clothing, and schooling, evacuees may also get assistance by calling the Montana Hurricane Katrina Help Line at 1-866-400-2008. The line is staffed Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.